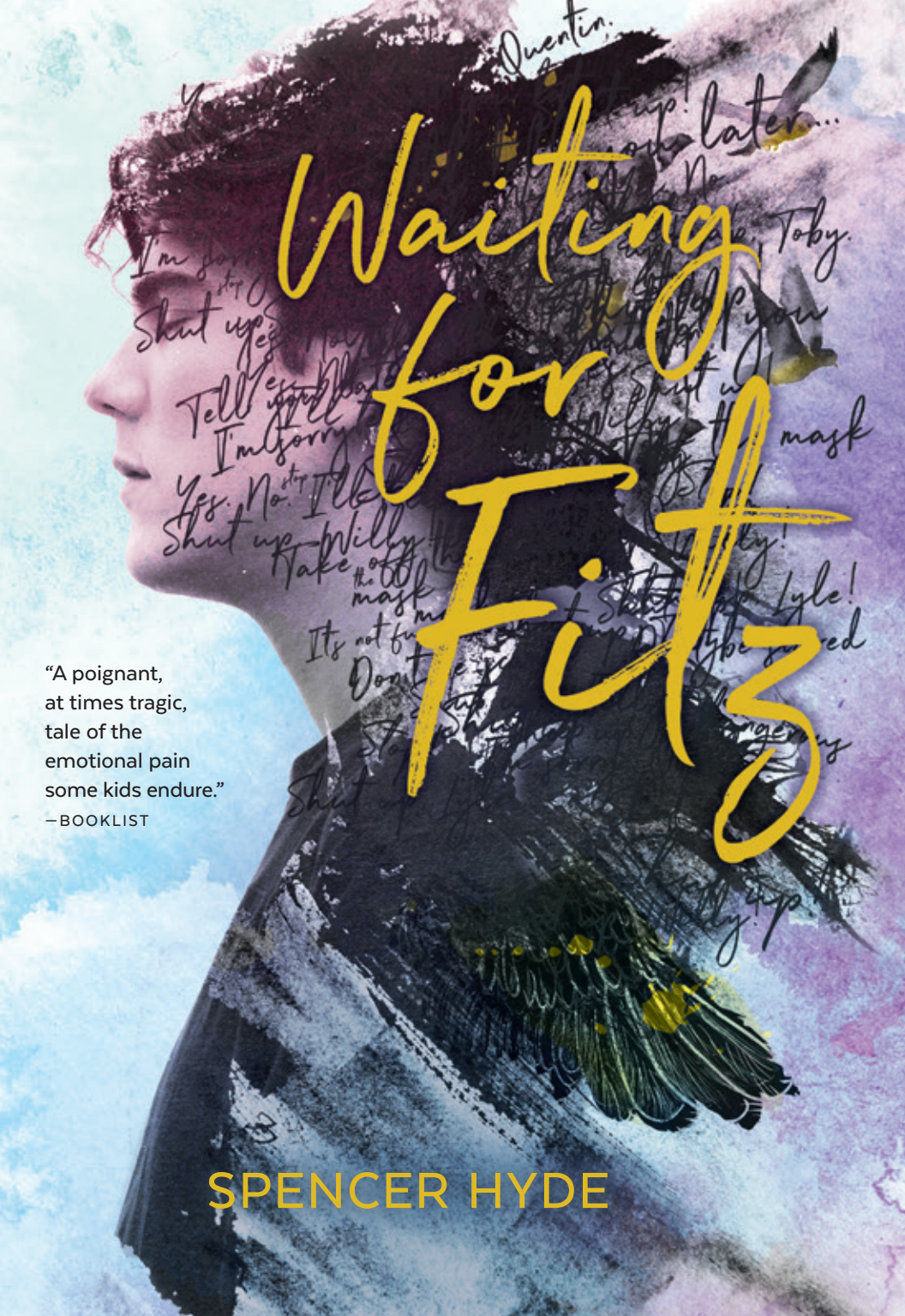
Waiting for Fitz
"A poignant, at times tragic, tale of the emotional pain some kids endure."
—BOOKLIST
SPENCER HYDE

HOPE IS MEANT TO SURPRISE US.
EXISTENCE IS MEANT TO SURPRISE.
LOVE IS MEANT TO SURPRISE.
LOVE DOES NOT BOW TO THE ODDS.
NEVER HAS. NEVER WILL.
What are you waiting for?

PRAISE FOR *Waiting for Fitz*:

"The witty literary sophisticate narrates a poignant, at times tragic, tale of the emotional pain some kids endure, none more so than eventual soul mate, Fitz. Savvy readers will be intrigued with Addie's Holden Caulfield-esque persona and use of absurdist drama to figure out her own life. . . . Fully authentic characters and a compassionate portrayal of kids in pain."

—BOOKLIST

SHADOW
MOUNTAIN

Addie loves nothing more than curling up on the couch with her dog, Duck, and watching *The Great British Baking Show* with her mom. It's one of the few things that can help her relax when her OCD kicks into overdrive. She counts everything. All the time. She can't stop. Rituals and rhythms. It's exhausting.

When Fitz was diagnosed with schizophrenia, he named the voices in his head after famous country singers. The adolescent psychiatric ward at Seattle Regional Hospital isn't exactly the ideal place to meet your soul mate, but when Addie meets Fitz, they immediately connect over their shared love of words, appreciate each other's quick wit, and wish they could both make more sense of their lives.

Fitz is haunted by the voices in his head and often doesn't know what is real. But he feels if he can convince Addie to help him escape the psych ward and get to San Juan Island, everything will be okay. If not, he risks falling into a downward spiral that may keep him in the hospital indefinitely.

Waiting for Fitz is a story about life and love, forgiveness and courage, and learning what is truly worth waiting for.

SHADOW MOUNTAIN

Photographer: Wesley Johnson

SPENCER HYDE spent three years during high school at Johns Hopkins for severe OCD. He feels particularly suited to write this novel because he's lived through his protagonists' obsessions. Spencer worked at a therapeutic boarding school before earning his MFA and his PhD specializing in fiction, short humor pieces, and essays. He wrote *Waiting for Fitz* while working as a Teaching Fellow in Denton, Texas. Spencer and his wife, Brittany, are the parents of four children.

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Waiting for Fitz

Waiting for Fitz

SPENCER HYDE

SHADOW
MOUNTAIN

For those still waiting.

Visit us at shadowmountain.com

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I don't think writers are sacred, but words are.
They deserve respect.
If you get the right ones in the right order,
you can nudge the world a little.

—TOM STOPPARD

Author's Note

Mental illness is so idiosyncratic that it is impossible to nail down. "Like trying to pin a medal on a shadow," as they say. The very act of categorizing different mental illnesses seems to deny a sense of individuality in some way. When people say they know what my OCD is like, I often balk, certain that they have no idea—even if they grew up with OCD! And yet, they must in some way be able to empathize, right?

I currently work in a youth group with two boys who are living with autism, and their experiences could not be more different from one another, or from the autism my nephew knows and lives with, yet they are all labeled *autistic*. What I'm saying is, my experience with mental illness is certainly not anybody else's experience. My OCD ticks, rituals, and washings are my own. We are labeled one way, and we live a life that fits our own definitions. I also have personal experience with individuals who have been diagnosed with schizophrenia and Tourette's. However, even those experiences are individualized and likewise distinctive and personal.

Now, this fictive world may not necessarily jibe with your experience of a psych ward (be that from popular media or firsthand

living). Some illnesses are intense but the person can stay in a local hospital instead of a state hospital; some rooms are private, others shared; some wards are coed, others are not. The list goes on. These issues vary from place to place, doctor to doctor, era to era, and from person to person. For example, I was in a hospital where twelve-year-olds ate breakfast (runny applesauce) and watched movies (almost always rom-coms) and played games (without batteries) with seventeen-year-olds. But that may no longer be the case. And that is okay. The world in this novel is made up in order to portray a specific experience, for numerous effects.

Addie's OCD is a reflection of my experience translated through a fictional character. Some might think she doesn't act impaired enough or show enough moments of frustration or exhaustion. That's just it—I worked hard to keep those emotions at bay. That is how I coped, and that is how Addie copes as well. And that's okay. Likewise, Fitz, Wolf, Leah, Junior, and Didi all fit with personal experiences I have had with each illness, or with each exceptional, unique, remarkable, wonderful human I know who dealt with a similar issue. If the way I portray OCD (or anything else) is different from your experience, mediated through your mind and your life and your struggle, well, you are totally right. Even better—we are both right.

In *Waiting for Fitz*, I have taken my personal experiences and fictionalized them. I have created this made-up world and tried to fill it with real-world significance, with meaning, with truth. I believe that is the aim of all fiction: we strive to put words into a rhythm and order that will reveal something redemptive about what it means to be human. It is a lesson in empathy; it is practice in how to live.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Discussing, talking about, writing about, and experiencing mental illness in all its permutations is tricky, delicate work. But that doesn't mean we should avoid the conversation. Frankly, we're all a little crazy. And that's fantastic. So let's learn how to be okay with discussing what it means to live (I mean, really *live*) with mental illness in this world, *and* in the worlds we imagine.

One

My life took off the comedy mask and put on the tragedy mask at the end of my seventeenth year. I won't get all sentimental about it, but you need to hear the whole story to make sense of that mask swap or whatever.

So my mom thought I needed more help than I was getting from my regular psychologist, Dr. Wall. I remember him getting upset once when I jokingly told him I felt like I had my back up against him at times. I started seeing him after my rituals got real bad. Like, really messy. He was less than motivational, to put it kindly. But I'd started showering about four times a day and washing my hands over a hundred times a day because my mind was telling me the people I loved would die if I didn't. That sounds absurd, right? Don't I know it. But in the moment it was life or death. Seriously.

If you look up "obsessive compulsive disorder" you'll probably run into some really obnoxious stuff that isn't all that accurate. Or, if it is accurate, it's made to sound like it's something that just takes care of itself or that gets resolved by some loving therapists,

followed by some block party thrown in your honor. It's not all Hallmark-channel type stuff. Trust me.

Let's be honest: We all have issues. Let's be even more honest: Sometimes we need help but don't want to face it. I understand now why my mother was looking for more help, for better help, but at the time I thought she was just overreacting. I mean, don't most teenagers have a three-hour morning ritual before they can walk out the door? Don't most teenagers wash their hands to keep their families alive? Just kidding. A little. But that's how it went with OCD. I guess if we get super technical, it's not all that untrue. But I did need help, and Mom took action.

She took me to see this nationally renowned doctor the summer before my senior year of high school. Apparently it was the only time in the last decade that this particular doctor had worked the floor of the psychiatric ward at Seattle Regional Hospital. But it also meant that I was to be an inpatient.

So, before you get all excited about this kind of added support, know that it meant I had to postpone my senior year of high school and stay in a psychiatric ward—the nuthouse, the puzzle box, the cuckoo's nest. Whatever. Look, Seattle is far from being a bad place to live, but if you are only able to see the world from six stories up it's just like any other place.

Here's how my first day went: I started the day by talking with Dr. Riddle—yes, that was his name, get over it—about the severity of my OCD. I wasn't hiding the fact that I needed help, but I also wasn't going to admit that staying in a hospital was the best thing for me. I mean, I was trying to focus on important things like *The Great British Baking Show*. Have you ever wondered what it would be like to sample that stuff? What do they do with it all after they bake it? What a waste.

I made a killer baklava, and I was going to miss, like, an entire season at the very least. I made Mom record every episode and promise she wouldn't watch them without me. The last time we watched had been a few weeks before I entered the hospital. I remember Mom walking over to the couch and crowding my space a little. She sat on my feet and warmed them up.

"Richard forgot the bread portion of the presentation this time, and he forgot to preheat the oven," she said, spoiling it. I wasn't there yet. Two minutes later, Richard indeed made both those mistakes.

My mom was a bit of an amateur baker herself, though she never let her bread dough prove for long enough; she was too impatient. I had proof.

"Look at that," I said. "Richard lacks toast, and he's still tolerant. More than I can say for you."

"What? I'm tolerant. Except for lactose."

"You don't lack toast. You had some for breakfast. I saw it. But sometimes you're still intolerant," I said. "Maybe you're also gluten intolerant. Maybe you're also flour intolerant."

"This is why nobody can watch shows with you, Addie," she said.

"You're a flour-ist!"

"A florist?"

"No, but I'd love to see a florist who only sold flours. Tapioca. Potato. Spelt. Buckwheat," I said.

"You're obnoxious," Mom said, smiling.

"Also, you can't preheat an oven. It's not possible. Anything is technically preheated. What you do is heat the oven," I said. "It's like how we say an alarm goes off. Well, that would mean it was

on to begin with. We'd be relieved to have an alarm go off, so it would stop sounding, you know?"

"Like I said—obnoxious," she said.

I was so sick of Richard being named Star Baker over Martha just because he had better presentations. It only matters how it tastes! Martha was the baker with the right flavors, and I thought that should win out over looks. Frankly, that should win out over anything.

I was there in the ward after Mom had explained why I needed the extra time in the hospital or whatever, so I wasn't too shocked by her leaving, though the fact that I was alone really hit me later on.

"This is about you, Addie," she said.

I alternately blinked each eye because I was counting to the number seven each time I heard my name. I'd been starting to think of the disorder as a paradox. Zeno, the School of Names—they both had the same idea, which was this: "A one-foot stick, every day take away half of it, in myriad ages it will not be exhausted." That's how I felt. Like I could walk halfway to the end of the room but never make it to the wall. Not really. Because I'd only ever be able to go halfway. I felt that even with all of my rituals, I'd never really make it to the end. It'd be impossible. At times, *I* felt impossible. Zeno had it right—an infinite number of rituals, and I'd still never arrive.

"I'm just winking at you, Mom. You know that."

She smiled and hugged me and started crying. Like, big and wet and messy kind of crying. I won't lie and say I didn't feel it, but with all the doctors milling around, I tried to be strong, and I thought not crying was mature. Looking back, I know I was wrong and I should've just let it happen.

I know a lot of things now, but at the time I was so consumed by my own disorder. It might look like my stay at the hospital was just a stopover for some new meds, or for added doctoral support. But it wasn't. I needed serious help, and I didn't want to admit it.

Each morning before school, I'd walk to the bathroom, careful not to brush the wrong carpet thread when I reached the threshold. I'd stand up and sit down three times before entering the bathroom. I'd sniff two times with each step while also counting the tiles beneath each foot. I'd make sure I blinked with my left eye before entering the shower. Counting each time I tapped on the shower wall, each tap on the faucet, and each throat-clearing, I'd net two hundred and seven. I'd do this seven times before exiting the shower. Then I'd wash my hands forty-three times. Those two numbers added together made two hundred and fifty, and the two and the five made seven, of course—my favorite number. Finally, I'd dry off, sit on the bed, and count to eleven. What a great number, eleven: it's first place two times, or seven and four, which is nice.

If anything went wrong at all during the ritual, I'd have to leave the bathroom and start over with a new towel, the carpet fibers back in the right place, the right amount of blinks per step, the right motion for each scrub, the right thoughts for the entirety of my time in the shower. If I pictured Mom's face and thought of the words *death* or *cancer* or *tragedy*, I would have to turn the water off and start over.

Again. Again. Again. The dichotomy paradox in action. I was a living paradox.

My downward spiral was similar to that water, getting sucked down and down until the rabbit hole was no longer a myth, and I was stuck in some alternate reality wishing there was a potion I could drink to get me out of there.

But I had to hope. That's all I had left between my bleeding hands and crushing thoughts.

My rituals weren't just confined to the bathroom. They followed me everywhere. I'd have to flip the lights on and off seventeen times before stepping on the stairs. I'd count each step, blinking three times with each left-foot step, four with each right-foot step—all the while, thoughts of death circling in my head. If I didn't tap the stair banister in the right increments, three times each, I was convinced that cancer would eat my mother from the inside out, turning her bones to dust.

She'd watch me with large, sad, hopeless eyes as I'd back up the stairs and start over. Each number I counted was tied to the safety of my mother, of my dog, of anybody or anything close to me. One misstep, one ritual imperfectly observed, and I had to start over so my mom wouldn't get in a car wreck on her way to work, so the dog wouldn't get tumors in her legs and slowly crumple to the floor. Stupid, I know. But try telling my mind that it wasn't as real as the thumping machine in my chest, pulsing behind my rib cage.

I felt embarrassed and ashamed in equal parts every morning. I hated taking so long, making my mother late for work, even as I knew that what I was doing was saving her, was keeping her alive.

I know it sounds ridiculous. But if you had to face three hours of that kind of thinking every day just to shower, you'd know there had to be something more, some other kind of recourse, some other kind of help. And while the compulsions didn't stop after the shower, at least I was able to go to school and lose myself in class lectures and books. In words. My only savior sometimes.

We'd drive to school, and she'd tell me I might need to start getting up earlier, or she'd gently ask me if I'd like some lotion,

while not mentioning the cracks in my hands where the cold was eating its way in, splitting my skin like veins rising to the surface, or the dried blood caked on my knuckles.

She was always careful with her words, and she never talked about how hard it was for her to sit and listen to the light ticking on and off, to the shower handles getting tapped, to the water purling through the drain for hours. But I knew.

Desperation skulked in the corners of my mind, in the shadows, snaking through my body and squeezing my heart.

I counted each beat. I had to.

Mom tried her best to keep me focused on other things. She was good at that. She even got a purple streak in her hair one day at the salon to remind me that things we do on the outside don't always determine the inside. But I still washed my hands that night. Whatever. She was trying.

"Make friends. Be nice to the doctors. Don't mock them. Don't be a smart aleck."

"But he's the best Baldwin brother."

"Stop it," she said.

"C'mon, Mom. Give it a rest. I only joke with people I like."

"Making fun is not the same as joking," she said.

"Semantics."

"Addie, I want you to be able to go to school without worrying about your hands bleeding because you wash them too often, or worrying about your family, or never feeling clean."

She started crying again. I looked down at my cracked hands and rubbed them together, then folded them under the sleeves of my sweater.

"I want that, too," I said.

I told you I wasn't going to get all sentimental, so don't think

this was a regular interaction. I was the queen of avoiding emotions by putting on my comedy mask and acting like everything was fine. I made up stories about my life, about who I would be later, about who I was then, about who I was friends with, and about what I was destined for. Whatever. You would too if you had to live with the aching parasite of relentless obsessions.

"Comedy or tragedy, Addie?" Mom said. It was a game we always played, but I wasn't in the mood, so I hugged her closer and cried on her shirt. Don't judge me. It was real.

So Dr. Riddle threw me into Group Talk the first day. I quickly learned that Group Talk was just an overly generalized name for spending an overly emotional, overly dramatic, and overly annoying hour and a half with seven other people. We'd eat lunch after group, then I'd meet with the Doc one more time before heading off to Therapeutic Activities and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. In the evening, the other patients and I usually sat around and watched a film together before separating to our small whitewashed rooms with small white beds and a ridiculous excuse of a pillow. That's about how most days went.

But I want to start with that first day for two reasons. One, obviously, it was the beginning of my journey. But it was also the day I met Fitzgerald Whitman IV. Totally pretentious name, I know. And don't worry, he knew it too.

So, Group Talk. The seven of us sitting there on cheap metal chairs with one of the main therapists in the ward who ran the whole thing. Sometimes Dr. Riddle sat in and listened, but more often than not it was one of his lackeys. That's what I called them, anyway.

Dr. Tabor was the leader of the group that first day, and most days thereafter. He wore these oversized glasses and was balding

and looked to be in his late-twenties or early-thirties. He had this corny smile that reminded me of the guy on the Quaker Oats logo. Dr. Tabor started every freaking meeting by asking us to explain our most recent encounter with our "Core Issues."

We met in this lousy room with a bunch of over-the-top clichés printed on the walls. Things like "Stop Wishing, Start Doing" and "Your Only Limit Is You" and my least favorite, "What You Are Looking for Is Not Out There, It's in You." You know, overly trite quotes that made me want to throw up all over the walls. I was pretty sure I was allergic to banal platitudes. Whatever.

But that first time I really didn't notice the quotes. I just walked in and sat down and blinked at the floor and tapped my leg six times on each foot and rubbed my hands together and waited for something to start.

After Tabor talked about our core issues, he related a story—as he would do every day, I'd come to learn—that we could discuss. We had to introduce ourselves before making our first comment: first name, age, what you were in for (like I was in prison or something, no joke), and how you would cope with the issue presented that day or that week.

"Addie. Seventeen. OCD. And I came in late so I didn't hear the prompt or whatever," I said.

I looked at my feet and then back up and noticed that, while most of the group were staring at the floor or at Tabor, one boy across the room was looking right at me and smiling with this ridiculous, smug grin. He had curly, dark brown hair and these really cool gray eyes and these broad shoulders. He looked to be about my age. He slouched in his chair and had his feet crossed and his arms folded over his sweats. He was wearing a tie-dyed bandana and a hoodie that said *Om Is Where the Heart Is*.

"It's a real crumby situation," he said.

"Thanks, Fitz. I'll fill her in," said Dr. Tabor. "But first I'd like you all to say hello to our newest member of the group, Addie."

They all gave me halfhearted waves. Except Fitz, who just nodded his head like he was hip or something—or too cool to raise his hand.

"I often start with current events, Addie. Then we gauge our reactions and discuss the emotions inherent in those reactions," he said, smiling and leaning forward and putting his hands on his knees. His massive, white doctor coat fell over the chair and made it look like he was floating. I hated that coat.

"In the news this morning, there was a story about a man found dead in a giant dough mixer at a bakery on Beacon Hill. He left behind two dogs. His neighbors loved him. His family is seeking millions of dollars from the bakery for this accident. Now, I want you to consider what you'd do, as a family member. How might you react? What would be the best way to deal with the situation? How would you cope?"

Dr. Tabor opened up one of those stupid manila folders and prepared to write down my comments, I assumed.

"Sounds like he really loafed on the job," I said.

Look, it's not like I was trying to get a laugh. In fact, it was way too easy. I like challenges for my comedic outbursts, but this one was meant to deflect, which is why I passed over all the great proving jokes available. I hated being put on the spot, and I hated talking about my emotions, so I pushed them away by being deadpan or whatever.

Fitz sniggered, and Dr. Tabor ignored my comment, maybe hoping my comment was accidental in nature. Hint: nothing I

say is accidental in nature, or in any other way. I'm kind of always acting, if you will. And you will.

"What's that?" said Tabor.

"I take it his family is suing because he just couldn't rise to the occasion?" I said, raising my eyebrows and feigning seriousness.

Dr. Tabor didn't know me yet, so he was unsure how to respond. "I doubt his family is worried about how hard he worked, though I'm sure they are saddened by his passing. What would you do, if you were his sister?"

"I'd tell my parents that at yeast they still had me," I said, hurrying over the pun so Tabor would think I was actually being honest.

"That's good, Addie. Remind them that they still have things to look forward to, people to care for, and other fires of love to stoke."

"Guess that's what happens when you stand a scone's throw from a mixer," said Fitz, smiling at me.

"That'll be all, Fitz," Dr. Tabor said. "This is a real person."

"A real person working on a recipe"—I paused—"for disaster."

I smiled. That one had been for Fitz, if I'm being honest. And I am. But then I was immediately aware of how inadequate I felt in the presence of so many people. I was talking like I was at home in a familiar setting. Maybe it was because that's how Fitz made me feel, because he kept the joke going.

He smiled back, and I noticed he had this huge Julia Roberts-type smile, but with a big gap between his two front teeth.

My look: I was in jeans and a sweatshirt, balling the sleeves up in my palms because that's what I did when I got nervous. My long brown hair was always twisted into a bun on my head with a pen in it to keep it stable. I had dark brown eyes that I hid behind

numbered blinks, and a chest that was smaller than I'd hoped and legs shorter than I'd like. I was entirely average.

But at that moment I realized my sweatshirt was, like, incredibly bland, and I felt super self-aware. Whatever. We were all in the same adolescent psych ward, and clothing options were limited.

Dr. Tabor was explaining how our jokes were a typical avoidance tactic, but I was ignoring the doctor because I was watching Fitz. I thought the gap in his teeth was kind of handsome, especially when his gray eyes lit up his large features. I'm not trying to fixate on the fact that he was attractive—he *was* attractive—I just wasn't sure of anything else about him at that point. Well, I knew he was clever, but that was also partly based on basic assumptions.

I decided I'd keep looking at him throughout the meeting to show him that I wasn't going anywhere. Maybe that's not a good way to put it. I mean, I wanted to be going somewhere—read: home. Anyway, he seemed very confident—not just based on posture, but the way he ignored Dr. Tabor and kept whispering to the people on either side of him. I'm surprised the doctor didn't ask him to stop talking.

Next to me was Doug. He was fourteen, had Tourette's, and was a pathological liar. Like, something beyond what you're thinking. Something serious. He was wearing this massive fur hat with the earflaps poking out from either side of his head. I learned to really like Doug because he was totally arrogant but had no idea that's how he was coming across. And he was kind.

Across the room, next to Fitz, was Junior. That's the only name I ever heard him mention, anyway. He was a big seventeen-year-old who looked like an all-star athlete, but he had this crazy-bad acne all over his face and it made me feel sorry for him. I hate that sometimes we don't get to choose what our masks look like. At

the same time, I guess that's what makes us turn on other parts of our personalities that otherwise would stay hidden. You know, like working a muscle that would otherwise atrophy or something. Fitz looked like an athlete too, but a little smaller, I guess.

Anyway, Junior was in for anger issues and seizures—I know, a super weird combo. He often said, "It's just funny, that's all," and that's how we knew he was starting to get really angry and on the verge of completely exploding. He said when the seizures were on their way he heard something like birds' wings rapidly beating in his ears, or the sound of cards shuffling.

I liked Junior because he was the most honest of anybody in the group—meaning he didn't cover up his emotions by putting on a comic (or even a tragic) mask, or anything in between. What would that be, anyway? A rom-com mask? A tragicomic mask? C'mon. Semantics.

Dr. Tabor finally got around to Fitz for real and had him introduce himself.

"Fitzgerald Whitman IV. Seventeen. Hold on, I'm getting some new information," he said, leaning sideways. He wasn't leaning into Junior next to him, but acting like he was listening to someone just behind Junior, some imaginary person.

"You sure?" Fitz said, then waited as if for a response. "Okay, I'll just roll with it. Thanks." He turned his attention back to the group. "Apparently I'm in for schizophrenia, according to my friends over there." He pointed to an empty corner of the room near Dr. Tabor.

Dr. Tabor immediately settled his face in a *Let's be serious* look, lowering his eyebrows and looking at Fitz in that annoyingly doctor-ish way—a mix of disappointment and encouragement.

Fitz looked at me and saw that I was smiling, I think, because

he smiled pretty big himself before turning back to Tabor. The hour and a half flew by, and I started looking forward to spending my mornings perpetually disappointing Tabor by not ever allowing true emotions to enter the room.

True emotions would mean that I was facing my OCD, and that would mean I was ready to do some actual work. I didn't want to do either. I hated the fact that I needed serious help, but more importantly I hated that I *knew* I needed serious help. I couldn't deny it anymore. But I wasn't just going to let it happen. I was too defiant for that.

My junior year had been a mess. I spent pretty much all of my time at school, or visiting the psychologist, or at home reading or just hanging with Mom.

Mom taught history at the high school near Puget Sound where we lived. Dad was out of the picture pretty early in my life; he'd died of heart failure. It always made me angry. Everything was now post-death. Post-Dad. And it's genetic, so I'm constantly listening to my heart and counting the beats and wondering how big my heart is. That's another thing I do in the shower—I have to count seventeen beats before I can wash my hair, and if I miscount, I have to start over. Like, the whole process has to begin again. The paradox of Addie. That's me. Sometimes I wonder how big my heart is not because of Dad or death, but because I tend to push others away. I wonder if my heart is abnormally small in that way.

Mom was fun to talk with, and she kept me living outside of my disorder at the worst times, but I spent most of my time reading short stories or plays or screenplays of movies I really liked. Sometimes, if Mom wouldn't let me see a movie in the theater, I'd order the screenplay and read it anyway. Sounds nerdy, but nerds are cool. Get used to it.

I wanted to be a playwright someday, so I was working on reading all the classics and studying story arcs and how they created emotions in the audience, and how they built characters and all that. Everything from Shakespeare—I called him Mr. Shakes, but that might be inappropriate with Junior's seizure issue and all, right?—to August Wilson.

I wasn't a shy person or anything, but I also wasn't one to show off my, like, performative disorder. I didn't want to go to a friend's house and alternate eye-blinking and hand-washing and throat-clearing in specific, numbered intervals and have everyone be all uncomfortable and afraid of how to respond or how to avoid mentioning something that I was struggling with. It made me a selfish person, but I had no other options.

My mind didn't allow me much time between washes. The hospital was different because they didn't allow me to wash, so I just got angry. Junior understood that world better than I did.

"How would you deal with this incident, Fitz?" said Tabor, drawing my attention back to the story of the man who died at the bakery.

"Well," he said, looking at me, then at Tabor, "I'd make sure to check with my friends first." Fitz looked at the empty corner just behind Tabor. "But then I'd approach any extended family and see if there was anything I could do to help."

"Very good," said Tabor.

"But that wouldn't work," I said, surprised at my own boldness and eagerness to engage in the conversation.

"Why not?" said Tabor.

"Because people don't do that. Nobody asks the family if they need anything, if they can help, and really means it."

"That's a pretty bleak perspective, Addie," said Tabor.

"But it's the truth. Nobody in this room is going to say anything that's true and completely unmediated. We all have masks we wear and games we play to try to portray the least vulnerable version of ourselves. We want to be looked at but not really seen. It's all a performance. We might ask that family how we could help, sure, but we're doing it while wearing the mask of 'the helpful neighbor.' We're doing what society expects of us, not something we truly want to do."

"Okay," said Tabor. I could see he was formulating a response, but he was too caught up in writing down notes in his stupid folder.

"In the end, we're all pretty selfish. We like the stage and we like the lights on us and we like hearing the crowd roar, but we don't really want anybody to know just how long we studied those lines or worked on those facial expressions or sweated and prayed to find some understanding of what it all means to be given a role in life and how we are supposed to play it. We're all just comic figures hiding the tragedy beneath. Or we've given up and accepted that our play ends in death, so why bother getting the makeup on or even performing to begin with? We don't really want to help that family. Especially when it's a family in knead. Get it, Tabor? K-N-E-A-D?"

I couldn't help myself. I felt myself getting too serious, so I turned back to humor. I didn't like facing the serious side of myself.

"I get the first part, Addie," he said. "And I think we should discuss the idea of vulnerability at our next Group Talk."

I saw Fitz roll his eyes when the V-word was mentioned.

"We should also discuss what she said about acting and masks," said Fitz. "That was interesting. I hadn't thought of it like that. Shoot, maybe it's all just an act, Tabor. Maybe you feel like

you're under the lights right now, and all you're doing is playing a part. Do you really want to help us, or do you just want to study us so you can write a paper for one of those pretentious journals? What are you after?"

Dr. Tabor brushed the comment aside and told us we'd come back to my comments the next morning. Then he instructed us to all say something positive to the person next to us. As group ended, orderlies waited at the door to direct us to our next therapy sessions.

"Don't worry," said Fitz, walking my way as we all stood. "The orderlies only help you for the first couple of days. Then you get some freedom."

"Freedom?" I said, pointing to the barred windows on the far side of the room. Not all the windows had bars, but our room did for some reason.

"Don't worry. One day Junior is going to rip those out of the wall and we'll all be able to jump. Also, be careful saying that word around here. We're all a little *jumpy*."

He shouted the last part and smiled at Dr. Tabor, who just shook his head disapprovingly.

"Quite the mask," Fitz said to me.

"What?"

"The one you're wearing. It's gorgeous. And if it is really all an act, I want to see you take the stage, Addie. Front-row seats, please."

"I'm jealous of you," I said.

"Oh, yeah, why's that? Can't do a one-woman show? Or do you just like the handsome gap in my teeth?" He smiled bigger and pointed at his mouth.

I laughed. "It's just that if I had you on the stage, I'd have a full cast. Do you have names for your invisible friends?"

I was worried I may have overstepped, but I tried to act confident in my comment.

Fitz sidled up to me, leaning in and almost whispering. "That's not a good way to introduce yourself, Addie. I mean, I can call them imaginary because we're so close, but when you say it like that, it makes them feel like you don't believe in them. It's okay, Toby. Don't cry," he said, acting like he was putting an arm around someone's shoulder to console them. "Big, crocodile tears," he mouthed to me, as if shielding Toby from his words. I'd learn later that Fitz kept up this cheery façade so he didn't have to confront the shame of those insistent voices and their ever-present squeeze. But like I said, that came later.

I coughed three times because two made me feel uncomfortable and four was a number I equated with death. Sometimes. Sometimes four was nice. Whatever. Then I blinked, alternating eyes, seven times. Being this close to someone I found attractive made me nervous, and when I got nervous I got anxious, and when I got anxious my compulsions tended to skyrocket. Like, to an obnoxious level.

"Morse code isn't going to work either," he said, pointing at my blinking, "but it does make those big brown eyes even prettier. If you want to get to know the whole gang, we should meet up for lunch. I know this great place. They have these awesome orange trays and this incredibly runny applesauce. It's so runny you could swim in it. Just imagine it—it's kind of beautiful, isn't it?"

I was kind of turned on by the way he stared at me with so much confidence. He had zero apprehension, or so it seemed.

"You should sit next to me at lunch. First, I have to go find

out which one of my imaginary friends tried to steal some meds from the pharmacy and a keycard from an orderly. Probably Lyle. He's wily."

"I would love to meet Lyle."

"I'll see if he can make it," he said.

We walked to the door and out into the hallway, sunlight pooling from windows that overlooked the Seattle skyline. The fiery leaves of September caught in branches like small embers tipping on to the ground. Threadbare clouds scudded past, and a small smudge of orange hovered in a corner of the sky.

That's when Martha stepped into the hallway. Martha had worked as an orderly at the hospital for years. She wore those ridiculous shape-up shoes that claimed to improve your calf muscles. She was a little on the heavier side, and had this amazing grin and this awesome black hair that always looked like she just rolled out of bed. Like, always. She also wore a fanny pack. I wasn't sure what it held, but I was glad fanny packs were still going strong. Best of all, she was always genuine. I never had a bad thing to say about her, though sometimes I tried.

"She's here, right? You see her too?" said Fitz, motioning to Martha.

Martha and I exchanged a look.

"Can never be too sure in my condition," he said. "Meeting new people is always a test."

"Sure, act like you don't know me, Mr. Fitz," said Martha before moving on.

"Okay, I guess it's time to go, Addie . . . ?" he said. He hung on to my name as if asking for the rest.

"Addie Foster."

"Okay, Addie Foster. See you at lunch. I'll be wearing the

slip-resistant booties and these killer sweats. If I'm late, don't wait for me—it just means I've been detained because I have a serious, tragic condition eating away at me constantly."

"And a morbid sense of humor," I said.

"I also love fast food and B-grade movies and Ultimate Fighting, so I'm probably up there with the elite thinkers you seem to like. You know, the ones who write those plays you seem to enjoy, based on your comments in group. You like to talk about acting, at any rate. But didn't Chekhov say you can't put a truffle on stage if you're not going to eat it in the next scene? Something about not breaking your promise to the audience?"

"A rifle," I said.

"A trifle?"

"Rifle," I repeated.

"Semantics," he said, as he began walking in the opposite direction. "See you at lunch, Addie Foster. Don't stand me up, unless you find me on the floor."

The orderlies nudged me and nodded in the direction of Dr. Riddle's office. I started to walk down the hall with my two new friends. When I looked out the window on my left and saw the clouds splitting and gathering weight, I smiled. I watched the white clouds set against the darkening sky and I could only see it all as nature's handsome gap.

I wanted to know more about Fitz. I needed to know more. He was the only thing keeping me from getting lost in the whitewashed walls and medical halls of the hospital where I was supposed to be confronting my core issues. Whatever.

It's not like I was ready to eat that truffle anyway.